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ABSTRACT

Last fall, in no less highbrow a publication than the Harvard Educational Review, two professors--W. Norton Grubb of Berkeley and Martin Lazerson of the University of British Columbia--fired a thunderous broadside at career education and vocational education. The editor's summary puts the matter succinctly. "Grubb and Lazerson concluded that the ills career education proposes to solve...are intrinsic to our economic system." But what is most remarkable about the article is the confusion it created in the ranks of both career and vocational educators. Many felt abused and defenseless. The attack exposed a serious vulnerability. We have no systematic rationale. We have no solid sense of identity and purpose. We do not always have a sure sense of our relationship to the other necessary aspects of education. We need a new outreach to the nation's thought leaders. We need a new rationale, solidly rooted in sound scholarship. We need a coherent national policy. And I think we should, at least in private, thank God for scholars like Grubb and Lazerson who take vocational education seriously enough to criticize it extensively. We can only profit from such attention. (Author/LH)

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Address to Joint Meeting of the National and State Advisory Councils on Vocational Education
May 6, 1976
Hyatt Regency Hotel
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The Greening of Vocational Education

by
Dr. Marvin J. Feldman

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Last fall, in no less highbrow a publication than the Harvard Educational Review, two professors--W. Norton Grubb of Berkeley and Martin Lazerson of the University of British Columbia--fired a thunderous broadside at career education and vocational education.

It was a shot heard round the educational world. While vocational educators seethed and sputtered, the Washington Post and and the New York Times applauded. The article was as widely quoted as any I can remember. At the very time when work-related education was finally ascendant in the public consciousness, the article was cited as evidence that the vocational emphasis in education was illicit and ineffecitve.

I know most of you have encountered the Grubb-Lazerson article. I want to use it as a point of departure for a couple of assertions of my own. The article is essentially wrong, but it is wrong in a useful way. The authors and the reaction to their work exposed a couple of dangerous weaknesses in vocational education.

These weaknesses are not the ones Grubb and Lazerson meant to expose or thought they were exposing. In fact, I expect they are puzzled by the uses to which their piece is being put.

Grubb and Lazerson make a point which falls far outside the mainstream of the debate about the place of work-related education in the larger scheme of American life. They are not so much upset by what work-related education does, but by what they believe it fails to do.

They are principally troubled because career education and vocational education have failed to set right certain "crimes committed by the economic structure."

Now for one thing, this is not the language of scholarship; it is the language of the soap-box. For another, the authors have

CE 007143

trouble with the relationship between career education and vocational education considering the former the successor to the latter. But, leaving these problems aside, the authors describe the "crimes" which career education fails to correct as follows:

> "Capitalism is an economic system in which capital is central. As part of the drive for profits . . . Managers in an economic system like ours endlessly divide, simplify and eliminate jobs. This results in a constant status of underemployment for most workers."

Needless to say, this indictment of the market economy is not new. Marx wrote in Das Kapital over a century ago:

> "In manufacture, the enrichment of . . . capital, is dependent upon the impoverishment of the workers."

And, in another place,

> "Manufacture transforms the worker into a cripple, a monster, by forcing him to develop some highly specialized dexterity at the cost of a world of productive impulses and faculties . . ."

In short, Grubb and Lazerson assert that what are most commonly called Marxian social ideals are not best achieved by career or vocational education. Or, even, that work-related education interferes with the realization of these ideals--that, like religion, it is a kind of "opiate" of the working class.

And in this assertion, of course, the authors are absolutely right. The concept of career education, and the practice of vocational education have not contributed to the overthrow of the capitalist economic order. This was not an oversight. This has never, to my knowledge, been our intention.

The editor's summary puts the matter succinctly. "Grubb and Lazerson concluded that the ills career education proposes to solve . . . are intrinsic to our economic system."

The point is, of course, that we propose to solve an entirely different ill--the dependency-creating lack of skills to make a living. We don't believe people are enslaved when they learn skills. We believe people are enslaved when they have no skills. Nor do most of us believe that a tendency to "cripple" wage earners is "intrinsic" to our economic system. We do not advocate work-related education as a way to correct this imaginary tendency.

A recent book by Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis titled

Schooling in Capitalist America broadened the indictment. "Since its inception," they write, "the public school has been seen as a method of disciplining children in the interest of producing a properly subordinate adult population."

In short, schooling is designed to produce a docile work force for the capitalist.

Now it is true that both schools and work places have only slowly been freeing themselves from the ancient supposition that hierarchical organization and repressive discipline were the best way to get results from people. But to call this coincidence a conspiracy is fanciful. It was the simple result of an error common to both schooling and business management. As Christopher Jencks points out, schools were hierarchical and repressive when wage labor was practically unknown, when most white citizens were self-employed.

Where, it seems fair to ask, are Grubb and Lazerson's ideals achieved? Where is the model? It is, we find in a footnote, in Communist China where work and school are "logically" integrated. There, "the production of goods and food is meaningful." But in the United States where goods are produced "for the profit of the few," the integration, presumably, is not logical. "A strong sense of community and purpose also serves to animate work among the Chinese people," while in the United States "almost all jobs are motivated by external reward--primarily wages, and secondarily status and power."

Now these authors seem to know more about the Chinese experience than the rest of us. In my opinion, the carefully controlled evidence that has reached us so far does not support any generalization. There is the much longer, somewhat more accessible Soviet experience but it does not, on the whole, invite emulation.

The dialectical extravagance of Grubb and Lazerson is out of place in serious discussion of the goals and achievements of career and vocational educators. The authors, of course, are entitled to believe what they want to. The market system is far from perfect; but, the Marxian forecast notwithstanding, there is simply no evi- that it has in practice offered progressively less satisfying work to fewer and fewer people.

Many educators, including vocational educators, see the need for enormous improvements in workplaces, and are often among the severest critics of the inhuman use of human beings by organizations of all sorts. But few would agree that there is an inherent, inexorable tendency toward such abuses under capitalism so that the only durable remedy is some elemental systemic change.

Thus the principal assertion of Grubb and Lazerson is not arguable. Marxian social ideals are not, as they say, best achieved by career or vocational education.

But many of the assertions the authors make in support of this major contention are uniformed or wrong-headed or both, and have contributed to a misunderstanding of the goals and practices of vocational education, and this is what has disturbed members of NACVE.

The authors imply, for example, that career education comprises a monolithic position which can be readily and rigidly characterized. The fact is that career education has never spoken with a single voice. Yet Grubb and Lazerson not only assert that it does, but attibute to it an elaborate set of intentions and attitudes. To begin a sentence with "Career educators believe . . . " is already to mistake the character of the career education "movement."

What are some of the attitudes the authors attribute to career educators? Here are a few:

- That "they have been aggressive in refusing to define career education precisely."
- That they "call for a dramatic re-orientation of the entire educational system . . . so that all phases of the curriculum would be job-oriented."
- That they "stress that too many pupils unnecessarily go on to college."
- That they "see retraining as distinctly subordinate to the reform of elementary and secondary education."
- That they believe "schools make work into an abstract concept."
- That they "place great faith in the moral benefits of work."
- That they "claim all work can have equal dignity and meaning."
- That they assume "jobs are both increasing in technical sophistication and requiring less education."

Some educators may share some of these beliefs; a few may hold all of them. But the authors present no evidence, except a few quotations from a handful of sources, to support their contention that, "career educators" as a whole rally 'round this elaborate rationale.

Grubb and Lazerson assert without evidence that "career educators have gone to great lengths to dissocate career education from traditional vocational education." Their purpose, apparently, is to set the stage for a synthetic conspiracy not unlike the stage-managed rape in The Fantasticks. I am not aware that anyone has gone to any length

at all to dissociate career from vocational education. Everyone I know acknowledges their unmistakable philosophical connectedness.

We are treated to a fanciful interpretation of the origins of vocational education. It was, the authors tell us, "part of a movement by the educational system to embrace the goals, structure, and methods of corporate capitalism." This is simply silly.

Vocational education, they say, has failed. "In terms of status, income, job mobility, unemployment, and job satisfaction, vocationally trained students did no better and often did worse than students in academic programs." This is demonstrably untrue.

The article throughout is factually undernourished. The authors present thunderous generalizations without evidence. "Most work," they say flatly, "is boring." The degradation of work," they assert, "has been continuous."

This is not the American reality--not nearly. Our economic system (really it is a non-system) has provided an ever-expanding number of jobs. Real wages have risen dramatically. Eighty-five percent of the cash flow generated by business is paid in wages. Hours are shorter. The four-day week, once a pipe-dream, has become a reality for many workers, the three-day week for some. Work places are safer and cleaner. Machinery has eliminated the most back-breaking and repetitive tasks and is continuing to do so. And the humanization of workplaces is gathering new momentum. A new book, The Future of the Workplace by Richard Cournelle, catalogs this growing phenomenon.

This is not to say that everything is swell. Of course it isn't. But the contention that American workers are being progressively and inexorably degraded, exploited and dehumanized, is not to be taken seriously.

When Gallup asks people, "Is your work satisfying?", 80% - 90% consistently say "Yes."

The famous Work in America report to the Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare in 1972 reported that 80% of all American workers say they would keep on working even if they inherited money and didn't have to.

But what is most remarkable about the article is the confusion it created in the ranks of both career and vocational educators. Many felt abused and defenseless.

We are not guilty of the particular sins of which these particular authors accused us, but many of us weren't sure at first whether we were or not. Whenever our legitimacy is challenged, we

are angry and disarmed. "Whom the gods would destroy, they first make mad."

The attack exposed a serious vulnerability. We have no systematic rationale. We have no solid sense of identity and purpose. We do not always have a sure sense of our relationship to the other necessary aspects of education. And if there is a national policy toward vocational education I would like somebody to tell me what it is.

Our rationale has too often been simplistic and superficial. We have been inner-directed. We have talked to ourselves. We have been sitting in the back of the bus, seething and grumbling. We have been evangelists--too often depending more on emotional appeals than on reason.

Some of us in vocational education have complained for years that the world sees us as a subordinate second to liberal education. I certainly have.

Some of us wallow in the knowledge that we are maligned and misunderstood. I certainly do.

But lately I have been thinking that perhaps we have invited these demeaning characterizations because we ourselves have a limited vision of vocational education. I think we have misunderstood ourselves. Vocational education has a soggy sense of identity and is desperately in need of consciousness raising.

We in vocational education need our own liberation movement, and the first step is to liberate ourselves from a limiting definition of what we are and what we can do.

If a person thinks in his heart that he is second rate, he is trapped by that definition, as surely as if he were. He will be second rate. He cannot go beyond it.

I see signs that vocational education is suffering from a serious identity crisis. Things vocational educators have said for years are becoming the new universals.

We have a great and growing role to play in modern society. But we are not responding fully. We have accepted the submissive, subordinate role so long we have grown comfortable in it. We have been riding in the back of the bus so long we have grown comfortable there. We have become the Uncle Toms of the educational establishment. The world has at last taken a different view of us. Now we must take a different view of ourselves.

A wise man once pointed out that the specialist's most common

error was to stretch the relevance of his speciality beyond its natural limits. We have, in our desperation for support and attention, too often implied that vocational education would solve all the problems of the world--from ingrown toenails to peace of soul.

Vocational education has clearly outgrown its original rationale and achieved a new maturity. It needs a mature rationale to match.

We have been proudly "practical," forgetting that this practicality has a rationale with roots in Aristotle.

Academic educators speak of liberal arts as if a vocational emphasis were somehow illiberal. Vocational education is liberating.

It liberates from an enslaving limitation--dependence on degrading toil. Many of the most stirring and permanent works of art are the work of anonymous craftsmen. Artisans extend the range of choice, enlarge the human experience.

We are told that the liberal arts liberate the artisan from the narrowness of his special skill. That is true. It is also true that liberal arts are lifeless without practical expression and thus the practical arts are equally essential to the civilizing process.

The Grubb-Lazerson article seems to underline another necessity--the need to cultivate a wider audience. We have traditionally spoken almost exclusively to the consumers of vocational education. That will forever be our first, favored constituency. That is the source of our particular strength.

But we have clearly neglected other constituencies. We have, perhaps because of a sense of inferiority, neglected the academic community.

In 1968, NACVE mounted a campaign to change the attitudes of parents and students toward vocational education. That effort was a success. Vocational education isn't preceived as a program for somebody else's kids anymore. In my state--New York--half the students in secondary schools and community colleges are enrolled in vocational education. Nationally our enrollment now exceeds 13 million. The nation now spends $3 billion a year for vocational education.

We've achieved many of the goals we dreamed about in the Fifties. Vocational education is becoming the dominant mode of education in America.

This new status brings problems and responsibilities of a new and unfamiliar order.

We need a new outreach to the nation's thought leaders. We need

a new rationale, solidly rooted in sound scholarship. We need a coherent national policy.

The National Bicentennial Conference on Vocational Education in Minneapolis October 10-13, 1976 can be a crucial first step toward these new imperatives. Sponsored by the National and State Advisory Councils on Vocational Education, the Bicentennial Conference will focus attention on the role of vocational education in the future. Leading experts in economics, sociology, political science, education, business, labor, and other fields will examine the role of vocational education and its relation to other segments of the educational community, to the workplace, and to the community at large. I hope its planners will give it maximum depth and that all of us in vocational education will give it our full support.

And I think we should, at least in private, thank God for scholars like Grubb and Lazerson who take vocational education seriously enough to criticize it extensively. We can only profit from such attention.